

# WRITE the way you would TALK



---

Gerald Ensley's advice  
on interviewing and  
writing—for rookie  
reporters & columnists

---

WRITE  
the way you would  
TALK

---

Gerald Ensley's advice on interviewing and  
writing—for rookie reporters & columnists

---

## CONTRIBUTORS

Nathan Archer is a cartoonist, illustrator, and graphic designer living in Tallahassee. Since 2016, Nathan has produced editorial cartoons and video content for the *Tallahassee Democrat*. Before joining the *Democrat*, he published and contributed to *Lydia Feeds The Pigeons*, Tallahassee's local comic anthology. Nathan received his BFA in painting from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2000 and his MA in arts administration from Florida State University in 2006.

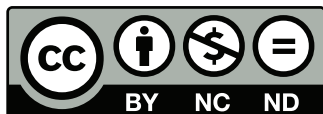
John Roberge is a Tallahassee designer, illustrator and painter. He created the Seminole logo in 1971 while working at Florida State University. He went on to serve as the art editor for *Florida Wildlife* magazine before being hired by the *Tallahassee Democrat* in 1987. He worked as the senior newsroom artist for 21 years until his retirement in 2008. John's entire career at the *Democrat* overlapped with Gerald Ensley's.

Compiled by the daughter of Gerald Ensley, Amanda Karioth Thompson, and an anonymous partner she's forever grateful to.

Cover design and layout by Nathan Archer.

Portrait line drawing by John Roberge (1999), digitally remastered by Nathan Archer.

Cover design includes examples of Gerald Ensley's shorthand. Section headers on pages 1 and 20 are typeset in his handwriting.



Copyright © 2019 by Amanda Karioth Thompson. Some rights reserved. This is an open access work distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0), which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made. To view a copy of the license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

# INTERVIEWING

When I started in newspapers, I thought the hardest part of my job was writing and the easiest part was reporting. That's because I asked only a few questions, finished that job easily, then sat stymied over the keyboard because I had so little information to write.

Thus the secret to good writing is information, and the secret to information is interviewing. Even with the internet and other research resources, at least 80 percent of a story's content comes from interviewing.

It's a skill that doesn't come easily to most beginning reporters. Most journalists are introverts. They get into the business because they express themselves better in print than orally. They're not salesmen or performers by nature. Yet to be a good reporter, you have to be a salesman and performer. Interviewing is getting strangers to talk to you and trust you with information. You have to impress them with that quality quickly – then you have to sit back and display the qualities of a good listener. It's an easier balance than it seems – once you master the salesmanship skills.

Those skills don't rely on personality, though a breezy personality can help. They depend on preparation, knowledge and attitude. If you know what you want to ask, know something about the subject you're discussing and talk to people in an even, friendly tone, they will open up to you. You will have good interviews.

A good interview is a conversation, not an inquisition. It's a natural give-and-take in which both parties are comfortable. Following are some tips on how to create that relationship.

## BEFORE GOING

**Every interview is a performance, so be ready physically.**

I try to get a good night's sleep before a big interview. If I can help it, I won't interview at times that my biological clock is not geared for work (early morning, late night). I don't go out and party the night before a big interview, because a hangover takes you out of your game. And trust me, I've been there enough to know it's true. I once had a massive hangover and had only

two hours of sleep before interviewing a famous golfer at his home. I like to think he didn't recognize anything was amiss, as I managed to ask many questions and he talked at length. But I knew that I was not doing my best, and it showed in the story.

### **Dress well, but not distractingly**

Clothes are part of your unspoken body language, and they send a message about you. And improper clothes can affect how your subject responds. In a 2002 survey by Administrative Assistant Advisor, 76 percent of respondents said appearance determined whether they took someone seriously, and 78 percent said it affected their confidence in someone's ability. The main thing is to dress professionally. That means don't dress in a way that is distracting or insulting. Interviewing is not the time to impress people with your fashion daring or sexual attractiveness – both of which can be distracting. Don't wear see-through blouses or short, short skirts or loud costumes. Interviewing is not the time to impress people with your casualness – which can be insulting. Reporters who wear T-shirts, cutoffs or ripped jeans are saying, "This interview is not a big deal to me" – which is a slap in the face to the subject. That doesn't mean there's a uniform way to dress. It means an interviewer should dress in clothes that are clean and businesslike, clothes that will put the subject at ease or be unnoticed. A good rule of thumb is to dress in the manner of the people you'll interview. Always err on the side of being overdressed. People expect a person working to be dressed professionally, and you'll be more comfortable overdressed than underdressed (if only because most of us look better overdressed).

P.S.: Never wear sunglasses during an interview if you can avoid it. People need to see the eyes of the person questioning them. And always carry breath mints, and use them before interviewing people up close.



## **PREPARATION**

The way to be professional and to short-circuit nervousness is through preparation, preparation, preparation. Later, I mention that a reporter must be willing to act dumb. But a reporter should always know the basics of the person or subject before arriving. Read everything you can. Know the thrust of the issue. Know the pros and cons. Then prepare specific questions. List

everything you'll want clarified – spelling, age, background – as well as everything new you're trying to find out. Prepare far more questions than you'll need. If you're doing a profile, talk to everyone associated with the subject first. Others will provide information the subject won't, and they'll give you questions to ask that you might not have thought of. A man might not tell you his childhood nickname was Stinky – but his sister will. A woman might not tell you she visits with retirees every Sunday – but a friend will. In particular, read what your publication has already done on the subject or topic. If you're interviewing a person for professional expertise (weather, agriculture, computer), familiarize yourself with the topic as best you can. Even if you're calling just for a fact or two. Many people – particularly technical experts – are disdainful and unforthcoming with interviewers who don't know the basics. It doesn't mean becoming an overnight expert, but rather simply becoming conversant on the subject.

## THE INTERVIEW

### Introduce yourself clearly/professionally

This pertains mainly to phone interviews: State your full name, affiliation and position slowly and firmly upon contact with each person. "Hello, this is Jim Davis. I'm a reporter with the *Sun Daily Times* newspaper in Waterloo, Iowa." Obviously, the extent of that introduction can change with your location and familiarity; if you're talking to someone in Waterloo, you don't have to add "Iowa." But too often, I hear a reporter making his or her first contact with an office by saying, "This is Jim with the *Times*." That can be confusing and inadequate, and gets the conversation off to a rocky start. No. 1, not everyone may know the name of your organization by its shorthand. No. 2, it doesn't tell the person he or she is dealing with a reporter: He or she may think Jim is trying to sell them a subscription. And you should repeat your introduction to every layer of an organization to which you speak: receptionist, secretary, subject. You may not wish to share the nature of your call with each person on the chain ("I'm calling to ask your boss if he cheated on his income taxes" is best replaced by "I would prefer to explain it myself"). But it's important to let everyone know who you are.

### Attitude

Again, interviewing is about meeting strangers and getting them to share the information they know. It involves dealing with people who are generally wary of what they say to the press. Recognize those realities upfront, and be prepared to handle the challenges they present. Extroverts may find it easy: They have a gift for natural chatter and enjoy the challenge of sometimes edgy conversation. But most writers are introverts who run from verbal confrontation

and dread engaging strangers in conversation. They have to work at overcoming their nervousness and projecting a trusting verbal personality.

But anyone who has ever asked “Where you from?” or “What’s your major?” has been an interviewer. And anyone who wants to do his or her job well can learn to project a certain amount of oral enthusiasm and authority. Certainly, it’s especially hard for younger reporters dealing with older people. Young people feel a natural deference to adults that makes it hard for them to engage the person in meaningful conversation, much less challenge an older person who seems to be giving inadequate, inaccurate or incomplete information. But it remains the job of younger reporters to get the information and talk with interview subjects as equals – and they can do that by keeping the following guidelines in mind:

- **Be professional.** Some writers aim to be chummy, some try to be confrontational. The proper relationship is somewhere in between. You want to be friendly enough that the subject opens up – but not so ingratiating that they feel betrayed if you write something uncomplimentary. There’s got to be a distance that says “I’m here to do a job, and your comments are going to be delivered to thousands of people,” coupled with an empathy that says “I’m not out to be unfair or paint a one-sided picture.” That may seem like a delicate line to walk. But it’s simply a matter of being polite, friendly and objective enough to serve both masters: the subject’s remarks and the public’s interest. Of all the attitudes reporters adopt, the worst is confrontational. Some reporters think that challenging every remark shows how tough they are and will cow the subject into revealing The Truth. In reality, aggressive/snide/sarcastic/unfriendly attitudes spur the subject into clamming up and revealing as little as possible. That keeps the reporter from learning much information. And such attitudes are rude.
- **Be conversational.** You’re there to ask questions, but you want a normal give-and-take. That means laughing when people tell jokes and expressing sympathy when they talk about sad things. It means asking follow-up questions to things they say: “How much did that cost?” “Was that the first time someone tried that?” “Was it difficult?” In some respects, it’s like acting: You have to play a reporter whether you feel like it or not. But you also have to relax: Even if you have only a few moments to talk with a person, make those minutes count by being calm and conversational. You adopt such mannerisms because they’re polite and show the subject you have a real interest in the exchange. And they provide a give-and-take that will take you into areas you wouldn’t have known to ask about. Often, it is spontaneous reactions and ad lib questions that lead to the most important or best comments and form a crucial part of the story.

- **Be patient.** Some people like to talk. Let them, and go whatever direction they want to take the conversation – though be prepared to get them back on point if you're strapped for time or they're wandering too far afield. If you interview a series of people about the same topic/event/occurrence, let every person tell you the whole story again. You may get new information or you may get conflicting information. It's especially important to be patient for interviews about controversial or difficult subjects. If you let people talk long enough, the truth will come out.
- **Be friendly and interested.** The most important factor in interviewing is tone of voice: You have to convey an overall impression of friendly caring. People love to talk to anyone who seems interested and sympathetic. Some reporters just sound unfriendly or annoying – or, most often, disbelieving. People don't want to confide in reporters who sound as if they're challenging every comment or statement. Other reporters talk like robots, asking delicate questions in a flat tone of voice that suggests they're bored, don't care or don't understand the subject. So much of voice tone is natural, but part of it is attitude. And if interviewing is going to be a big part of your job, you must acquire the attitude, voice and manner that puts people at ease. I suggest taping yourself and evaluating your voice. Most of us hate our own voice and can't change the basic sound. But you could notice some things – such as sounding bored, slurring or rapid speech – that could be corrected. You could also do some mock interviews with friends – because the goal is to talk with interview subjects in the same non-accusatory, non-arrogant, open and interested tone you use with friends. Some reporters also forget that the person they interview can be put off by their demeanor. If the reporter slouches, fails to make eye contact or yawns, it colors the subject's impression and responses. Everything is part of the package. Sit up straight, look at the person and appear interested – even if you're not.

### Sequence your questions

Ask your most innocuous questions first, building to the more delicate and awkward ones. That gives the subject a chance to get comfortable talking in general, and to get comfortable with you in particular. Don't make phony small talk. It's fine to ask, "Is that your family in the photo?" but it's phony to gush, "That's just the cutest kid." Weather is always a safe subject. Sports, too, if you see something that indicates the subject has an allegiance to a team. Good small talk is noncontroversial information that is easy to answer but will also be woven into the story: "How long have you been doing this job?" "What did you do before?" "What kinds of clients do you serve?" After that, you can segue into the tougher questions: "Some people are accusing your company of billing city government for misleading consulting work. Why do you think they've made these charges, and are they accurate?"



### **Ask specific questions**

The TV school of reporting has given us the “What do you think about this situation?” question that expects the source to just start talking and cover all the angles. In any good interview, the subject will take off. But the best way to get that flow going, and to keep it going, is to have specific questions related to the topic. You don’t ask, “What kind of football team will you have this year?” You ask, “What will be the main improvements of this team over last year? What are going to be your weaknesses?” You don’t ask, “How do you like being an actor?” You ask, “What led you into acting? What is the biggest challenge about acting? What do you like least about acting?” You don’t ask, “What do you think of this rally/demonstration/event?” You ask, “What issues brought you out today? What do you hope this event accomplishes? What are your biggest concerns today?” Journalism teachers have always admonished reporters not to ask “yes or no” questions. But good questions also need to elicit more than a single sentence; they need to elicit paragraphs of answers and a train of thought.

### **Tell where you’re going**

Usually at the beginning of an interview I explain what newspapers call the “budget line.” That is, I give a synopsis of the story I’m trying to write: “I’ve been told that the money for the new animal shelter is going to be cut from the budget and that has caused concern in the community. I don’t know if that’s good or bad, but I want to get your perspective on why the cuts are being made and how they will affect service.” In addition to explaining what my overall story is, I also explain my purpose in asking specific questions. I don’t just ask, “What is the animal shelter’s budget?” I ask, “You said the cuts are necessary to control runaway spending at the shelter. What is the shelter’s budget?” The point is I want the subject to know where I’m coming from, so they can answer in context and so I don’t surprise them in print.

### **Put what you know on the table**

I let the source know what I know. I tell the specific charge: “Commissioner, I’m told that many residents think you fired the city manager and police chief so that you can install your friends in those jobs. What’s your response?” Some reporters disagree with this, because they see reporting as a game in which they want to trap the subject into saying something that’s a lie. They would ask: “Why have the city manager and police chief been fired?” Then after the person gives some high-minded answer, the reporter lowers the boom and in effect accuses the subject of lying. I think that’s unfair and unnecessary. I’m not out to trick anyone, I’m out to find out the facts. I don’t always say who told me, though that varies on who told me. If it’s an underling, I say, “I’ve been told that such-and-such is true.” If it’s a specific legal charge or it’s been said by an official on the record, I’ll name the source – often to relieve myself of the burden of being the accuser.

### Be cynical – but in a friendly way

Part of letting the subject know where you're going is displaying the cynicism that a reader would have. If you interviewed someone from the association of Christmas tree sellers about how to pick a good tree, the person might say: "All you have to do is ask the seller if the Christmas tree is fresh." Well, the logical reaction would be, "Sure, but an unscrupulous seller might lie." So you point that out to the subject, and with luck it leads the subject to amplify on the basic comment with other ways to tell a good tree. Even if the subject can't amplify, it may lead them to say, "You're right, there are some unscrupulous dealers, but the majority will answer you accurately." The point is to ask the question the reader will ask. The point also is to let the subject know you're thinking about the cynic's question – and not surprise them in print. Too many writers let the subject say the naive or plain-Jane remarks, then ambush them in the writing with the cynical observation that the subject never got to respond to. Thus, it's only fair to ask the cynical question while reporting and give the source a chance to respond. But the key is asking the cynical question in a friendly manner, which can often be done by invoking the devil's advocate stance: "You say dealers will tell you if the tree is fresh. But I'm sure some readers will say, 'Sure, but what if the dealer lies?'" In almost all cases, the cynical or awkward question can be asked in a manner that allows the subject to answer comfortably. My favorite device is to say, "I'm just playing devil's advocate here, but what about...?"

### Give up your ego

You're not there to impress interview subjects with your knowledge; you're there to find out what they know. Sportswriters and younger reporters are notorious for doing more talking than asking. They ask long, involved questions full of their opinions. Sometimes it's because the reporter is a pompous ass who doesn't understand his or her job (or recognize that the subject knows more about the topic than the reporter). But generally, it's because the reporter is nervous or unsure, and wants to appear to be knowledgeable. Either way, too much talking by a reporter is unproductive. At worst, it distracts or annoys the subject, and keeps them from feeling comfortable enough to reveal important information. At best, it takes time that could be better spent by allowing the subject to talk. The secret is to talk enough to keep the conversation going and show you're interested, but to stay silent enough that the subject dominates the conversation.

## **Never be embarrassed to act dumb**

Reporters, like any other people, are reluctant to act as if they don't know something – especially if they think they should know. So when someone starts talking about politics, current events or notable history, many reporters just nod and say, “Yeah, yeah, I know what you mean” rather than admit they don't. That's fine for cocktail parties, but it can be death in interviews because the reporter will not get the specific implication of what the source is saying. It's better to make interview subjects explain exactly what they're referring to. If the subject says, “That works because it's an economy of scale,” don't nod in agreement because you think you should know the term “economy of scale.” Ask, “What is an economy of scale?” If someone says, “Yeah, he broke Babe Ruth's record,” don't nod in agreement. Ask, “Which Babe Ruth record?” A subject may act like you're stupid for not knowing – but he'll really think you're stupid if you get it wrong in the story. My motto is it's better to be embarrassed in front of one person than in front of the thousands who may read your story.

## **Make people repeat if you don't understand or hear**

Similarly, you'll feel stupid if you didn't understand the words people said and you get the information wrong. Some people mumble, some people use slang. You're there as a translator to the public: You must be sure you heard and understood correctly. Especially important are getting names and numbers right, no matter how many times you make them say it again. In spelling, for instance, people tend to spell their names quickly because of their familiarity with them. A-B-B-O-T-T might roll off their tongue, but it's easy for a stranger to miss a letter. So make sure you've got it absolutely right by repeating the spelling slowly. If you're writing in a notebook, even show them how you've written it. Same with numbers. Repeat them. And think about the numbers as you write them so you don't get hoodwinked by what old newspaper editors call The Two-Minute-Mile Rule. Sometimes we get so busy writing down stuff we forget to think about what the numbers mean – such as when you think you heard someone say they ran the mile in 2:24. That's impossible. But it's easy enough to write it down and not realize it's illogical until you're back at the keyboard.

So much of getting the numbers right requires you to think about context as you interview and write. An archaeologist once told me, I thought, that 69 priests accompanied Hernando de Soto's expedition of 400 soldiers in 1539. Only after I had written the story did I find out that what he said was *six to nine* priests – which I should have realized when he told me there were only 400 soldiers in the expedition. It should have struck me while I was interviewing or writing that there wouldn't have been one priest for every five soldiers. Similarly, you'll see contradictions in print because the writer

didn't put two and two together while reporting. For instance, someone says, "I've been a blacksmith for 20 years." Later in the story, they give their age as 33. It's unlikely they started blacksmithing at 13, so they're either fudging their age or inflating the number of years they've been a blacksmith. And the reporter should have spotted that and asked a follow-up question to get the information correct.

## Ages/logical questions

Be sure to ask the small but obvious and logical questions that readers will ask.

One of the most important examples is age: Age fixes the person in time and explains many of their reactions and responses. An obituary and a profile must always include age. But most other stories should, too, particularly those dealing with illness, mortality or achievement. Age is important to the reader on several levels. One is personal, as people measure such incidents against their own life and wonder: "Is that person older or younger than I am?" Age is also important if you're writing about a person's goals (running for office) or accomplishments (served six years on the county commission). Without ages, a statement or quote lacks information that is crucial to the reader's understanding. Examples:

- We said a woman "remembers seeing the Beatles appear on 'Ed Sullivan.'" How old she was puts the image in context. Maybe she was 12, which means she was probably excited. Maybe she was 50, which means she probably didn't relate (and if she did, that tells lots about her).
- We quoted a man: "I love America; I'm glad I left Yugoslavia to come here." The writer needed to state the exact year, and the person's age, to give an understanding of how long the person has been in the U.S. and to give some idea of the person's stage in life when he came. Someone who left Yugoslavia in the 1950s was escaping communism; in the 1990s, he was escaping the war in Bosnia; in the 2000s, he was just looking for a better job. All of them tell something about the person.

## Nicknames

Nicknames fall into the same category. If someone has a nickname that they're known by, readers will want to know how they came by it. Especially if it's unusual. Strangely enough, people often don't know the exact origin of a nickname. Former FSU athletic director Hootie Ingram was never sure how he got the name; his recollection was that a neighborhood boy was already named Hootie and for some reason it was transferred to him as well. But you should always ask. And when you write, you should address the subject, even if you have to write "So-and-so doesn't remember how he got the nickname."

**Don't forget the basics.**

Age, marriage, children, education, job history, place of birth, etc., are all basics that will be scattered throughout a story. Usually, it's nice to ask them at the beginning of an interview – but often they set too formal a tone (like being grilled by a nurse). Ideally, you scatter them through the interview at appropriate times (“You mentioned you were changing jobs for your family. How many children have you got? How long have you been married?” and so on). The main thing is to remember to check at the end of the interview whether you've covered the basics.

**Never interrupt an anecdote**

It is absolutely necessary to make people repeat or amplify a statement if you're not sure you understand or heard correctly. But try not to break up the flow of a conversation. If the person you're interviewing is on a roll, telling a story with lots of color, try to jot down your follow-up questions and ask them when he or she finishes a particular passage. Accuracy is important. But so are tempo and timing. An interruption in the middle of a potentially good story can ruin the speaker's flow and kill the anecdote.

**Shape the story as you go along**

Just as you must think about the numbers and information as you're taking notes, you must learn to adjust your questions as you go along. That's because the answers begin to produce a different or additional angle. If your editor sends you out to do a story on a heat wave, and several people say, “Yes, it's hot – but it's not as hot as last year at this time,” you have to adjust your questions. You have to start asking, “What was so tough about last summer?” and “Are you doing anything different this summer because of last summer?” You should also ask questions with an idea of how the information will fit in your story. I know a golf writer who used to ask pro golfers to identify which club they used on every shot – when in fact he rarely if ever used that information in the story. Like many reporters, he asked questions he thought were relevant – and showed his intelligence – without realizing such information never appeared in his stories.

Similarly, some questions lead to comments that have nothing to do with your topic. Talking about how hot it's been may prompt a subject to reminisce about the first hurricane they ever saw because it happened in the summer. Be polite and listen, but don't get caught asking more questions about

hurricanes. Steer them back to the subject of hot days. Then again, I know a reporter who interviewed a person about a business he ran with his wife. In passing, he said: “I was married once before. But my first wife was murdered.” And the reporter never asked any follow-up questions about the murder – which could have been a story in itself or might have involved the husband.

### **Interviewing many on the same topic**

When interviewing many people on a single theme, ask them many of the same questions – but try to ask each one at least one question that you ask only of them. That gives you many tools and quotes to use when you write to avoid repetition. (And if you quote one person on a topic, don’t quote the others unless they’re wildly different: One person saying “It’s very hot for October” is enough.)

### **Ask “Why?” – because the reader will**

Part of shaping the story means you have to think about what you’re told and ask appropriate questions – because you’re there to answer the readers’ questions.

- We wrote a story about how the FSU-FAMU engineering building was evacuated when a worker spilled solvent on himself. We wrote about how he was doused with water, etc. We explained what the solvent was used for. But we never explained why it was dangerous if it was spilled.
- We wrote a story about how a new Publix would have the chain’s first-ever “mezzanine” – but we didn’t ask what would be on the mezzanine level.
- We wrote a long story about how they were demolishing historic Baker’s Pharmacy – but never told why the building was coming down.
- We wrote a story about how FSU running back Nick Maddox didn’t live up to his potential – but we never explained why.
- We wrote a story about how FAMU was getting a rush of media attention for being in the NCAA tournament, but we never explained why (it was a small school, slated to play the No. 1 seed Kentucky).
- We wrote a story once about a 23-year-old guy who was breaking into law offices and stealing houseplants. Police found him because he left behind a pair of shoes, and police said his nickname was Spiderman. Yet our reporter did not ask what the guy did for a job (student? vagrant? stockbroker?), why the guy was stealing plants (which are hard to fence), why he left behind his shoes or why he was called Spiderman. Yet, those were the first questions every reader asked when they read the story.

It is the duty of a newspaper to give readers some kind of explanation for why the main event in a story happened – even if the answer is “Nobody knows” or “Nobody will say.”

### **Learn to listen for quotes**

People often give good information that is not a quote: “I’m 24. My father was a roadie for rock groups. I once met Mick Jagger.” Those aren’t quotes. They’re information. The old saying is “Quote for opinion, not for fact.” More broadly, quotes should offer perspective, attitude, judgment, opinion or comment – not facts. In the example above, you’d be looking for a quote that said: “Mick Jagger is a very kind and intelligent guy.” A quote doesn’t have to be funny or outrageous. It can be simply a pithy explanation by the person that gets to the heart of the matter. I once wrote a story about an appliance company owner who was active in local politics, usually on the side of conservative issues. I asked him why he was so political. He said: “I want it to always be possible for a businessman to start from scratch. I think the government is making that difficult now. And I hate it like the devil.” Though not funny or particularly colorful, the quote explained the guy in three sentences.

When you get to the end of an interview, you should have some sense of whether you have any quotes – AND IF YOU DON’T, YOU’RE NOT FINISHED. Keep plugging. Almost always the key word in provoking opinions and comment that is quotable is “Why”:

- If someone says, “She was the best leader this organization ever had” – ask why.
- If someone says the biggest problem with after-Christmas debt is that people don’t look ahead and reduce their spending – ask why.
- If someone says, “This is a complicated subject and there are no easy answers” – ask why.
- If the previous secretary of commerce had trouble getting legislation passed – ask why.

Never be afraid to re-ask previous questions to elicit a better quote or to force the subject to capsule an opinion they’ve just hinted at: “So you’re saying the trouble with the NRA is they aren’t responsible?” Usually, the person will reply (perhaps in exasperation) with a single statement, such as: “The trouble is the NRA is full of insane people.” It’s no sin to fish for a quote: It’s a duty.

### **Don’t spook people with your reaction**

At all times, act interested but nonjudgmental. Nod if they seem to want confirmation. Remain quiet if they’re saying shocking or outlandish things.

The point is to keep them talking. If a reporter seems to be disapproving or shocked, they may shut up. The reporter wants to be an interested but impassive wall. People will reveal more that way. Of course, you can be too blank. Sometimes people expect a reaction. It can be as simple as “Wow” or “I can’t believe that” or “That’s amazing.” Sometimes, your reaction is a neutral question to keep things going: “You say you were tried for murder? How did that happen?” Take your cues from the subject. Reflect the level of emotion they exhibit but don’t out-emote them.

### **Ask questions in kindest way possible**

Many subjects are delicate or embarrassing. Divorces, arrests, firings, deaths, mistakes. People may not like talking about those incidents from their past, but they need to be addressed in the story, and you need comment from the subjects. People will talk more easily if they’re asked in a sympathetic manner: “I understand you were fired after \$5,000 was lost. How did that happen?” People will talk more easily if you acknowledge you’re asking a tough question: “I know it’s hard to talk about this, but I was told your father committed suicide. Can you talk about that?” Sympathetic questioning will always get you more answers than demanding questions.

### **Handling obstinance/confrontation**

Some interviews are not convivial. Either the source has done something wrong and doesn’t want to talk about it, or the person has done nothing wrong but doesn’t want to open up. Both attitudes call for cool neutrality from the reporter. Be pleasant but insistent. Be professional, not personal. Always make it clear that you’re asking certain questions not because you’re trying to offend but because it’s your job: “Look, I’m just playing the devil’s advocate here. You say that you hired Jones because he was the best-qualified person, but others say you hired him because he’s your nephew. What do you say to that?”

### **Getting people to talk when they don’t want to**

Every reporter runs into people who don’t want to talk, either because they distrust the media or they don’t feel authorized to speak on a topic or they’re afraid they’ll get in trouble if they answer (especially if you’re interviewing them about the company they work for). The chief way to get those people to talk is bland persistence. Ask neutral-sounding or sympathetic questions over and over. Don’t take offense at the subject’s reluctance to answer. Don’t quit just because they’re reluctant. Every time the conversation seems at a dead end, ask another question. If they persist in not answering your questions, resort to the old standby: “I want to write a fair story, and the only way I can do that is if you tell me your side.” Most people find it hard to resist the



urge to give their side. If none of that works, well, you've done your best. Let it go. Write the facts that you know and note that the person declined to comment. Better yet, find someone else to comment. In fact, often you'll wind up talking to someone who really isn't the best person to quote on a subject (you don't want to quote a secretary about why a company went bankrupt). Recognize that and find someone else.

### **It's just the job, man**

One of the important pieces of giving up your ego as a reporter is to not take things personally. Sources will get mad or agitated or whatever because they're dealing with the media. It's easy to get offended and take it personally. But they're really getting upset with what a reporter represents – tough or uncomfortable questions. Don't be offended. Nod pleasantly and keep doing your job. In a similar vein, don't be offended when sources try to manipulate or guide the story: "You need to write this" or "You need to talk to this person." Trying to guide you is their job; yours is to decide for yourself what to do and whom to interview. Just nod pleasantly. Don't take their manipulations personally. Occasionally, arguments and confrontations are personal: Maybe you and the subject have talked before and they blame you personally for something. But don't respond if they get angry. You'll gain nothing by stooping to their level and responding with anger (and it just gives them ammunition for future confrontations). Stay calm, remain professional, leave if they refuse to talk or persist in being angry. You've done all you can. They may even call you back to apologize someday.

### **Off the record**

Some people use "off the record" every time they offer an opinion – even if it isn't controversial. Learning how to deal with such situations is part of your job. Yet different reporters respond to the question – "Can I tell you something off the record?" – in different ways. Some always refuse to hear off-the-record information because they believe it ties their hands to know something they can't use. Others will always agree to off the record – because they want to know everything. I will always agree to let someone speak off the record – because I believe there's always a way to use it. If a person makes an off-the-record comment that I think is important to the story, I'll go back and negotiate with them to use the information: "Hey, what you just told me is pretty important to the public's understanding of this subject. Let's figure out a way you can be quoted on this." Most people want their information published; they wouldn't have mentioned it if they didn't think it was important. But they don't want to look like they're talking out of turn or trying to be backstabbers. So you help them find a way to get the information or opinion on the table without compromising them.

Most often, off-the-record information or opinions can be confirmed elsewhere – if you know that information is out there. So it almost always pays to get the information and then find someone who will confirm it on the record.

### **“No comment”**

Anytime they don’t want to answer, you say: “That’s an obvious question, and that’s what people want to know. I can’t tell your side if you won’t tell me. And if you don’t answer, a ‘No comment’ is going to look bad.” BE CAREFUL WITH THAT THREAT, THOUGH. Sometimes a “No comment” is simply that: They’re not commenting because they’re not the person who should comment on that topic or because they really don’t know the answer. To tell them that a “No comment” will make them look bad could be erroneous and counterproductive: They may have been prepared to fill you in on many other things, but now you’ve just insulted them. Use the threat only if the person clearly knows the answer and clearly is the one who should be answering – such as a company president. Use it only in confrontational situations in which you must have a straight answer.

### **It’s your time**

Beginning and young reporters often cut off an interview too soon when they sense the subject is getting impatient. They feel the subject has already done them a favor by talking to them. That’s an understandable feeling, and a polite person never overstays his welcome. But remember that if someone agrees to an interview, you’re in charge. Don’t tarry unnecessarily, but ask questions until you’re satisfied. Yes, the subject may get impatient and appear upset. But he’ll be more upset if you didn’t ask something that ought to be in the story – something that isn’t there because you didn’t take the time to ask.

### **Source verification**

You’ll often interview someone who asks to read the story before it’s published.

The answer is always: No. The subject’s follow-up question is always: Why not?

The answer: The story is the product of the newspaper – and we bear legal responsibility and liability for whatever the story says. Allowing others to participate in that product while not sharing the liability is foolish. It’s analogous to McDonald’s letting someone else come in and cook a hamburger on their grill and serve it to the public: If the public gets sick, McDonald’s is at fault even though it didn’t actually cook the burger. If we’re going to run the risk of getting information wrong, we must have full responsibility for getting it right. Some sources will say: “But you don’t understand the technical details/history/arguments as well as I do.” That may be true. But

that's exactly the point of a newspaper. The reporter comes in as a lay observer whose job is to explain the story to lay readers. If the reporter can't understand and translate the information clearly, then the reader won't be able to understand it, either. Newspapers are not technical journals; they're explanations of complicated subjects for the everyday person. Allowing the subject to have a hand in writing those thoughts won't improve the communication path.

Two things reporters can do:

- You can agree to call back a source and read or explain how you worded a particular process, policy or explanation. The source can't decide how to word the passage but can help guide its accuracy.
- You can tell the source which quotes will be published in the story, because quotes are not interpretive but rather straight statements.

Some reporters like to read back all quotes to sources after an interview. That can be impractical, time-consuming and misleading. Only a few quotes ever get used in a story. But after you remind the source of every quote, they may make decisions on the best quotes – decisions that may not be reflected in your story. They may also want to start restating all their quotes. The best and fairest way to handle such a request is to agree to call after the story is written and read the quotes you've used. That lets them know exactly what's coming.

I don't read back quotes (or call before publication) unless asked. But I do try to finish every interview by recapping it. That is, I summarize their statements about the topic: "So let's see: You're happy that the city sponsors a recreation program but you're concerned about the costs. You'd like to see more women's sports, and you're not opposed to higher user fees to offset the costs." That shows sources that you understood what they said, gives them a chance to correct any misimpressions you received and underlines what I said about letting the source know where the reporter is going with the story. Sometimes, it also starts up a sort of "overtime" interview as subjects realize what points they haven't addressed – or realize from the reporter's accurate summary that the reporter is bright enough to grasp some further points.

## QUICK TIPS

- ✓ **Always leave a message.** Lots of young reporters and interns, especially, call sources and, when they're not there, don't leave a message. Sometimes it's because they plan to keep calling back; sometimes it's because the intern moves around the newsroom and doesn't have a permanent phone. Either way, it's best to alert the subjects that the newspaper is looking for them. If you tell the secretary that the newspaper is calling, the secretary can track them down. And even without a direct phone number to call back, some sources will call the paper (because most people want coverage; others want to know why they're being called).
- ✓ **Always return phone calls and messages.** Even if the message is a statement, return the call. Even if you know in advance that you're not the person who can help a caller, return the call. Even if you know the caller is going to criticize you, return the call. Even if you're too busy to return the call the same day, call the next day. Being a professional means always returning the call.
- ✓ **If someone asks you to send a copy of your story,** get the address and follow through (no matter how many days later the story comes out). All this stuff is good professionalism. It's good advertising for your paper. Mainly, it goes to the ultimate issue of how you treat the public: Most people deal with a reporter only a few times in their life. Leave them with a good experience.
- ✓ **No more than six notebooks.** This is an arbitrary figure I took from a journalist long ago. The point is that you can fit only so much information into a story. And while it becomes easy to chase every tangent in your reporting, you need to establish a benchmark to realize when you're pursuing details that will never make the story. The six-notebook guideline (or something similar) should merely serve as a warning bell: "Wait a second, I need to start outlining this story and see what I'm focusing on before I accumulate any more information."
- ✓ **If you want to reach a famous person, call early in the morning.** Big-timers start early and finish late – but early is generally the only time they don't have meetings or engagements with other people. It will impress them with your ambition/industriousness.
- ✓ **Pass out business cards.** They add a helpful professional touch. For one thing, they confirm the spelling of your name with the person you interview. And they underline that the interview is for real purposes, not

just shooting the breeze. Both are important points when interviewing a stranger. I prefer to give out a business card as I leave, punctuating the interview.

- ✓ **Don't form hard opinions about sources.** Someone who can't help you one time may help you another. Too many reporters have one bad experience with a lawyer, bureaucrat or law enforcement agency and let it color how they deal with them forevermore. Sometimes, those first impressions are right. But you have to play each story like a new game each time – which sometimes means going back to people who blew you off before.
- ✓ **Nothing is as big as the little things.** Spelling, starting times, scores, etc. Get those wrong and the reader quits reading. Always be specific about the details. Ask sources to spell, ask them to repeat, make sure you've got it right.
- ✓ **The Last-Place Rule.** Invariably, the last person you interview produces the best quotes. That's because you understand the topic so well by then that you ask the pointed questions it takes to elicit a good quote. This is a good rule to remember when you're hesitating about calling someone else because you've already talked to a lot of people and you're ready to start writing – but haven't talked with someone everyone said you should talk to. Call. That could be the one. NOTE: A popular device taught in journalism school is to ask at the end of an interview, "Is there anything you'd like to add or that I haven't asked you?" Generally, not much comes out of that because it's too open-ended. But for some people, it's a perfect opportunity to amplify on something they've already said that they want to go back to. It never hurts to use it as a closer.
- ✓ **Be sensitive.** The obvious examples are when interviewing people about a death or tragic episode. At times of trauma, people often react angrily or don't want to talk. Accept that. Be gentle. Say, "I know this is a difficult time, but would you be willing to talk?" If they don't want to talk, nod and walk away.

Remember also that most people don't talk to the media very often, and that most people will appear in the paper or on TV only once or twice in their lives. Don't expect them to be sophisticated or have great answers. Be patient, be helpful, be kind.

Finally, remember that the rules are different for people who aren't public figures. Ordinary people aren't used to talking with the press and may say something without considering its impact. If such a person says something outrageous but funny, it's OK to use it. If they say

something outrageous but mean, consider carefully whether you really need to use it. Yes, they said it – but what you're really doing in such situations is taking advantage of their lack of sophistication. Not only will it embarrass them, but it may make them suspicious and distrustful of the media forevermore. Unless it's the point of your story, don't make ordinary people look like fools.

# WRITING

## WRITING COLUMNS

### **Pick an interesting topic, not an important topic**

Write about topics for which you have real observations and feelings, rather than topics for which you think you **SHOULD** have real observations and feelings. Most of us can be funnier, wiser and more entertaining writing about our friends, our favorite TV shows or the way people behave while driving than we can writing about school busing, racial relations or censorship. That's not to say you shouldn't write about important topics. But pick the ones for which you really have a passion.

### **Talk to people**

A column should be opinion. But the best opinion is well-informed and reflects knowledge of what people are saying about the topic. Talking to people can introduce you to ideas you hadn't considered. Talking to people can elicit a perfect quote to use in the column. I find it a good device to say: "I'm thinking about writing a column about X, and my point will be such-and-such. Do you think I'm right or wrong?" That gives people a starting place to make their points, which may influence what you write.

### **Develop a point of view**

It seems elementary. But sometimes writers try to straddle the fence, and the result is a boring column. Some subjects can benefit from airing both sides. But generally, you ought to choose a side and write on behalf of it – even if you don't fully agree with yourself. The goal of a column is not an even-handed research paper. The goal is to stimulate readers' intellect and emotions, which is best done by writing with conviction.

### **Be brief**

Columns often have to fit a certain space. That's good. Resist the urge to write long columns. Start by writing everything you want – then spend time paring away unessential points and boiling down everything you say to its essence. Make a point once and go on. You'll find the more you trim and condense, the better the column gets.

## Avoid “I”

The first-person singular should be reserved for columns involving actions or memories in which your participation is a central theme of the column. You can use “I” when writing about the death of your dog or what it was like to meet somebody important to you. But you should not use “I” when talking about your opinions or observations about general topics. Any sentence that begins “I think,” “I believe” or “I thought” can be stated without the “I.” Do not write: “I thought mankind was put on earth to do good.” Write: “Mankind was put on earth to do good.” If it’s a column, the reader knows that any opinions that follow are yours.

## Outline and make notes

A column is like any story: It should be organized. In my format, I generally write in blocks of three: an intro that capsulizes the argument and my point of view; a middle section of exposition where I’ll often introduce other people; and a summing-up section that elaborates on my point in what I hope is an eloquent and conclusive way. Toward that end, I’ll create a small outline, jotting down the main points of each section. I’ll also write down good lines as I think about a topic, and then assign them to a section. An outline does not prevent me from writing other ideas as they occur (and a column sometimes has a life of its own). But it gives me a blueprint to get started and stay focused.

# WRITING PROFILES

## Remember that reporting/interviewing is crucial

Everything about profiles is in the interviewing and reporting. People read them for information about the person, not the writer’s style. Your chief job is to learn everything you can so you can paint the most complete and balanced picture of the person. The more you have to choose from, the more specific and informative you can be with your choices of the details that illuminate the person’s life. The more you *have* also means the more you *asked*.

## Make the most of personal details

A profile is worthless to me unless it includes some details about the person, aside from their public life. Perhaps their hobbies, their favorite sport, their family, their college activities, their ancestors. Many profiles about public figures are flat because they’re all about achievements and work-related issues, and the subject’s personality is never revealed. The details of a person’s life best reveal the person: “He plays a saxophone.” “He paints still lifes of fruit.” “His favorite vacation spot is a little town near Asheville, N.C.” “He and his



children play Scrabble on Fridays.” “His father was a vacuum salesman and his mother taught elementary school.” And always tell the age. The older you get, the more you’ll realize that everyone is judged to some degree by their age, and their achievements are viewed through the prism of the reader’s age: “He’s 30 and a CEO. Wow!” says the 40-year-old. “She’s 30 and still working for her father. What a bummer,” says the 20-year-old.

One more thing about details: Never leave your best stuff in the notebook. Before writing a profile, decide what are your best quotes, most telling details, most amazing achievements, funniest details. Then make sure you put them in the story. The exceptions are totally tangential stories and quotes – say the subject tells a funny story about someone else. But evaluate the material you have left over after a story and make sure you haven’t left out anything valuable.

### **Reveal the person ... but have a heart**

A profile should expose the human side of the source as much as possible. It’s easy to get caught up in the person’s job and achievements, especially if it’s someone famous whose work has a lot of twists and turns. But without some sense of the person, it will be a boring story. Thus it’s important to get a person’s history, hobbies and personality into the story. Even if it occupies only a few paragraphs, you’ve got to tell what the person is like away from the job. “He collects stamps, likes to read biographies and met his wife when both took a college history class together. Though a generally serious person, he does have a fondness for Jim Carrey movies.”

I always try to be faithful to the material but realize the impact on people. Thus I try to write plainly but diplomatically. The boy was “large” rather than “fat.” The woman “gave up” on careers in art and music rather than “failed.” Most people are in the paper only once or twice. When in doubt, err on the side of kindness. And if it doesn’t really matter to the story, and would be embarrassing to the subject, leave it out. Don’t use juicy/personal stuff unless it makes a point. “I remember a poker game when I split my pants.... That was the first time I met the speaker of the House.” Unless the splitting of pants is why he met the speaker, it’s an immaterial point (unless the speaker is famous or noted for his fastidiousness or has some reason that makes the split pants colorful and interesting).

### **Organize your material**

A profile can be told in a variety of ways, but you will sink under the morass of details and stories unless you have a plan. The major job of the plan is to group things in some kind of order. I usually tell stories in chunks of four or five subjects, with the first chunk being an opening section that explains

who the person is, why the reader should care and foreshadowing some of the details that follow. The chunks that follow are then condensations of related issues. Say a chunk about her youth, a chunk about her professional start, a chunk about her controversies and achievements in the present and a chunk about what goals she still has. Few people's lives can be fully told in the space of a newspaper or even magazine article — that's why biographies are popular. So the writer has to learn to condense. That's why the grouping is important. Decide what stories/details belong in which group, then choose the most important ones and condense them even more. Nobody is unique, yet everyone has nuances. The trick is to outline the big stuff and fill it with the little stuff.

### **Don't sweat your lead (often spelled lede)**

A good lead should be like a telescope into the story: It paints a picture of what is to follow. But don't agonize over how to start a story. The adage is: What would be the first things you say after "Dear Mom"? That is, what is the most important thing the story is about? When stumped, put it down in plain English – then come back later and dress it up.

### **Condense**

The writer is paid to say things the best way. Good stories and quotes, as told by the subject, can often be longer than you have room for, but they can be told in shorter form by a writer. Even quotes can and should be edited – not changing the meaning or intent but boiling them down to their essence. A sculptor starts with a big block of marble and chips away everything that doesn't belong on the face – while making sure to leave the most interesting features.

#### **Keep direct quotes to a minimum**

The longer I write, the fewer quotes I use. Quotes should be punch lines. Most of the time the writer can say it best and quickest.



## WRITING FOR NEWSPAPERS IN GENERAL

### Storytelling

The buzzword in journalism is “storytelling.” Which can be misleading because it sounds like a writer must labor to make a story particularly interesting or catchy. Storytelling simply means giving a picture of the information in a narrative that flows easily and clearly for the reader. In many ways, good storytelling is simply good packaging of information.

### Deciding what you want to say

Anytime you find yourself struggling to write, it’s because you don’t know what you want to say or emphasize. Two keys to that are knowing the main point and outlining all points you want to include in story.

- **MAIN POINT.** Imagine your mother, spouse or best friend asking, “What is the story about?” What would be the first thing you said to them, and how would you capsulize the story? Those twin thoughts are your lead and angle. Everything flows from those main points, even as you embellish on the main thoughts and include further points. But figure out in a sentence or two what the story you just reported is all about. In newspapers and TV, you have to capsulize those thoughts in a budget line: “They are opening a museum in Carrabelle that is dedicated to Camp Gordon Johnston, a WW II base where they trained amphibious forces for fighting in Europe and Japan. The museum was created by people who didn’t fight in the war who wanted to make a tribute to those who did.” From there, you can hang everything else.
- **OUTLINE.** For every big story and many smaller stories, it helps to create an outline. Nothing formal. Just a list of the topics/points/elements that you will probably want to include in the story. Sometimes space will keep you from including them all. But it’s best to write them down so you don’t forget them, and then arrange them by priority. The best way to outline is to read through your notes, highlighting information and quotes that you want to remember/include. Then write a list of the points. After writing, I go through the list again to make sure I haven’t forgotten anything important. Once you know the point you’re trying to make and the elements you want to include, writing is just a matter of connecting the dots.

### Leads

Don’t agonize over how to start a story. As in the example above, think about the point you’re trying to make, then find a simple way to state that point in the

first sentence. As you get experienced, you'll find more and more clever ways of stating your main point. But until such ideas come to you, don't agonize. Put the thought down in plain English, then come back and dress it up. You want to state the basic point you're making, while acknowledging any contrary or key accompanying elements: "The county wants to build a new road at Alligator Point – even as some residents say it is unneeded and will devalue their property."

## Nut graphs

Every story needs a nut graph, which is a paragraph that summarizes what the story will be about/why the reader should care. It may be a single sentence. It may be several sentences. But in some fashion, it sums up everything that follows. A nut graph is particularly important in a long story, such as a personality profile or article about a controversy, as it tells the reader what to expect in scope. It may include elements of foreshadowing, though full graphs or sentences may be needed to clearly foreshadow. The nut graph's main role is to summarize and explain why we're writing a story. It should appear early in the story, shortly after the lead, even if the lead is a long anecdote or series of ideas. Example:

- First paragraph: "Look at Fred Gainous' desk and you see he still has a dozen tasks to complete before he takes over as president of Florida A&M. Talk to his friends and you hear that Gainous is an avid Rattler football fan. Talk to his enemies and you will hear complaints about Gainous' leadership style."
- Next comes the nut graph: "But no matter who you talk to, certain things are clear: Fred Gainous is a busy, complicated man who is not afraid to make decisions, and is eager to apply the lessons of 20 years in higher education as head of his alma mater."

## Style

The most important thing in writing is to communicate ideas. Too many writers get caught up trying to have a "voice" or trying to impress readers with cleverness/intelligence/wit. In the best writing, you have no sense of the writer's effort: You're so caught up in the story that not until after you finish do you recognize the writer's talent. One of the corollaries for beginning writers is they try to fashion "real writing." That is, they use big words or ponderous phrases that they think sound more professional and high-toned, not the words and phrases they would use normally. Forget that. Write comfortably. Write the way you would talk. Use words and phrases that convey the ideas simply and clearly – and worry about how it sounds later. Good communication becomes its own style.

## The most interesting things and best quotes

Often, writers get caught going in a certain direction with a story. Later, they realize they left out the most interesting stories or quotes. That's not good. The first check in a writer's mind before writing is: What do I remember most about this story? The next check should be: What were the most interesting things the sources said? Know those before you write. Get the best things into a story.

## Deciding what fits

Even as you want to get the best stuff into a story, not everything is part of the story you're trying to tell. You may be doing a profile about a person, and they offer several good stories and quotes about other people. Unless one of your themes is about the person as a storyteller, those things are tangential and don't belong in the story. Again, you need to weigh your information beforehand, decide what's good and what fits – and aim to get in the best quotes and stories. And after a story is finished, check your mental and/or physical notes to make sure you didn't leave out anything that should have been in.

A good anecdote or catchy observation that doesn't relate to the entire story is worthless. "Jim Leyland pushed the last scrap of meat loaf around his plate, before looking up and saying: 'Jim Jones is a good pitcher.'" Nice as that image must have seemed to the writer, the meat loaf had nothing to do with Jim Jones' pitching ability, which is what the rest of the story was about.

## Using quotes sparingly

Shelby Strother, the late, great sportswriter for the *St. Pete Times* and *Detroit News*, used to say: "The longer I write, the fewer quotes I use." And with good reason: Quotes generally can't provide as much information as the writer – whose primary purpose must be to provide information. Quotes are not information. Quotes are opinions, descriptions or colorful comments about the information. They are punctuation to ideas. Quotes can help advance the story. But they're best used sparingly. Using numerous quotes, especially if they're repetitive or unremarkable, simply takes up space that could be better used by the writer to explain and describe the subject. Readers ultimately are more interested in the issues of the story than what people have to say about the issues. Remember: The writer is the professional communicator, the one best able to tell the story.

## Choosing quotes carefully

Quotes should be punch lines, not information the writer could capsuleize or say more concisely. "I'm 5-foot-8 and weigh 180 pounds" is not a quote. "I'm

a little short for my weight” is a quote. “My mother knew Mamie Eisenhower” is not a quote. “My mother said Mamie Eisenhower was a hoot” is a quote.

- Quote: “When I was 14, on the first night of summer camp, which was the most boring camp I ever attended, I decided ‘I’ll be a writer.’ I wanted to be a writer who gets to the heart of personal emotions.”
- Use: He decided at 14 to be a writer. “I wanted to be a writer who gets to the heart of personal emotions,” he said.

Often you interview someone who was nice and who gave a lot of good information – yet whose quotes were unremarkable. Still, out of gratitude, the writer feels obligated to quote those people so they’ll be in the story. You’ve got to resist the urge and use only the best quotes and the quotes that are valuable to the story. Serve the information, not the source. That holds true even for the people the story is about. People often are not the best commenters about themselves, and you may have to quote others more often than the subject. I did a 60-inch story on former Florida State football coach Darrell Mudra – and quoted him only twice. Though he had given me a lot of good information, he said only two things that could be considered quotes.

## Focus

Almost any topic can encompass many angles. But a reporter’s job is to focus the story. That means leaving out some issues that might be included in a longer story and answering every question you do raise. It may be tempting to show that you understand the complications of an issue by mentioning all the variables. But if you can’t explain the variables, don’t raise them and leave the reader wondering. For instance, don’t write “The rising price of gas is a reflection of the varying prices OPEC has charged for a barrel of oil over the past year” if you don’t know those prices and can’t explain their relationship to the price of gas. Similarly, if a football player gets hurt and you quote the doctor as saying the player is finished for the season, the next logical question is: “Is his whole career over?” The reporter must respond to that, even if it’s just a line from the doctor saying it’s too early to tell.

## Foreshadow

All the most relevant, important issues the story will address must be mentioned early to let the reader know where the story is heading and what topics it will address. Reporters sometimes resist that because foreshadowing seems to disrupt the smooth flow of their start. It doesn’t have to. But even if it does, it’s more important to state things plainly, at the cost of smooth transitions, so that the reader is not surprised later when important topics pop up. Here’s an example:

*They want to build a new boat launch in Apalachicola.*

*Proponents say it will persuade more bass fishermen to come to town and spend money. Opponents insist it won't recoup the money it will cost the city to build.*

*Both sides quote the old saying: "Bass fishermen come to town with one shirt and a \$10 bill and don't change either while they're here."*

*But really, this is a story about new ways meeting old habits in Franklin County. And it's caused a division among townfolks.*

The above passage touches on all the story's issues: a new boat launch, the division it's caused and the reasons people support or oppose it. The reader knows what topics will be covered.

### **Don't repeat**

Unless you're writing a book, you should almost always make a point only once, with your best example, and move on. Use only one quote that refers to a certain point. If someone says, "He was a shoulder to cry on; he was like a counselor for his students," you don't have to quote anyone else saying that, too. Sometimes, you're trying to hammer home a point and you may quote several people about it. But each quote should make a different comment about the same point. "He was a shoulder to cry on," says one person. "He was someone who always had good advice," says another.

It's important to avoid repetition as well when doing vignette stories in which several people talk about their experiences on a common topic (breast cancer, World War II) or common event (March on Washington, Woodstock). Ask each person similar questions, but then try to use each one for only one or two of the angles explored. Having them all weigh in on the same question becomes boring.

### **Sacrificing mood for information**

One of the problems with newspapers is space. Most of my rewriting time is spent condensing. My goal is always to get the information in. And if there is a shorter, more direct way of saying it that forces me to eliminate an anecdote, chop down a colorful phrase or otherwise take away some cleverness of writing, I'll do it. It's more important for the reader to know the information than to be entertained by the turn of phrase.

### What does it mean?

The news media are often justly criticized for writing more about process – which is what people, especially politicians, are saying about the issue – than about what the issue means. I try always to get in the points on both sides so that the reader can choose. But my main goal is to say in the most direct fashion what it all means: “Even though one-price selling will mean an easier negotiating process for car customers, the car dealership president said it will not mean lower prices for the consumer.”



### The obvious questions

Writers often get so immersed in a subject, they forget or don't see the issues that are important to a reader. Thus, they forget to ask or answer obvious questions. Sports reporters do it particularly because they get caught up in the “sportsness” of their stories and don't approach them as news stories. A receiver gets known as a “tall receiver,” and writers begin to refer to him without telling how tall he really is. Another good example is names. If someone has an unusual name or the same name as someone famous (especially locally famous), always ask about their origins and relations. If it turns out to be unimportant or they're not related, don't use it. But often, it's worth a line (“Yasinac is the son of the FSU professor from Yugoslavia who helped start FSU's program in code deciphering”). Similarly, if someone you write about is known for something in the past, be sure to acknowledge it: “Joe Smith, who wrote a column for the *Schnectady News* for years....”

### False detail

False detail refers to descriptions that are irrelevant, unremarkable or inappropriate – but were used as a cheap trick to display the writer's power of observation and to underscore the fact that the reporter was really there. They're a form of showing off that is often distracting. Examples:

- We wrote a story about the demise of the *Florida Flambeau*. Down near the end, we quoted the editor: “I did all I could,” she said, staring down at the speckled linoleum floor.” The writer is showing off her powers of observation, trying to summon a little mood and perhaps suggest the linoleum was old and indicative of the newspaper's failing finances (though “speckled” is the wrong word because all linoleum is speckled). But the linoleum had nothing to do with the story. The editor looking



down had nothing to do with the story (and one guesses the editor looked down several times during the conversation). And the quote came two-thirds of the way through a straightforward story in which no mood had been attempted previously. So it was an unnecessary and inappropriate detail that told the reader nothing. It simply was a bit of ego by the writer. Everything the writer was trying for could have been summed up with: "The editor was disconsolate: 'I did all I could,' she said."

- We wrote about a woman who apparently murdered her mother. The reporter arrived when the woman was being led away, and wrote: "She wore a loose-fitting white dress that blazed in the mid-morning sun." In the first place, what the woman wore was irrelevant. In the second place, any white dress would "blaze" in the sunlight. It was a remark that gave the feeling of detail but added nothing to the reader's understanding. It's the same as when a writer is interviewing a farmer and mentions that "the farmer wore blue jeans and work boots." Of course he did. He's a farmer. It's only remarkable if the CEO of a Fortune 500 company wore jeans and work boots – or if the farmer was wearing a business suit. Often you see descriptions that are interesting but really don't add anything to the reader's understanding of the story. They're just items a writer has added to say: "Look at my powers of observation." Say you're writing about a Little League coach, and as he gives tips to the youngsters, the writer adds: "He explained his theories while the shadows of swaying Spanish moss played on the vanilla-colored steel building behind him." That image, while nice, has nothing to do with the story.
- We had a story in which the writer was telling an interesting tale of a man who had claimed a volcano once existed in a North Florida swamp. Near the end of the story, the writer quoted one of the state geologists along on the expedition, who said a volcano there was possible but unlikely. She then added that the geologist "wore his long hair pulled back and an earring in his ear." Good detail, yes. But the geologist was a bit player in the story, along only for his opinion on the story's main subject (the guy who claimed he found the volcano). Describing him was distracting and unnecessary, especially as the writer quoted a couple other state geologists in the story but didn't describe them (no doubt because they didn't have long hair and earrings).

### **New readers every day**

One of the most common errors by writers who cover a beat is a failure to remember that not every reader has read every previous story. So they often forget to repeat key background information in subsequent stories. Such information can be condensed over time, but it must be repeated. Every story must stand on its own, not be thought of as a continuing series.

## Why, why, why?

Read almost any weekly paper (where the reporters are often young or inexperienced) and you will see a story like this:

*A car crashed into the living room of the Bill Jones home last week. It was a gray car. Seven people were eating in the living room when it happened. Bill Jones said, "I've never seen anything like that." It took the paramedics 40 minutes to remove the car. No one went to the hospital.  
Etc., etc., etc.*

Yet nowhere in the story will you read an explanation of why the car crashed into the house: It was on a hill and the parking brake failed. Or the driver was trying to turn left and lost control. In short, the story never tells why something happened. Yet that is one of the five W's (who, what, when, where and why) that are basic to journalism. Even if reporters can't answer why, they should reflect in the story that they tried. Examples:

- In an Associated Press story about John Thompson retiring as the basketball coach at Georgetown, the reporter never actually addressed the question of why Thompson was retiring (it turned out to be marital problems), except to say near the end that Thompson has been suggested for NBA jobs many times.
- We had a story once about a car accident in which the driver and a passenger were nude. The police probably wouldn't have told us why the couple was nude (we can guess). But we should have let readers know we at least asked: "Police declined to speculate on why the couple was nude."
- We had another story about how FAMU was going to change the number of student tickets and the method of distributing them for the homecoming football game. But we never explained why they were changing the policy (overcrowding at the games). It's the duty of a newspaper to give the readers some kind of explanation of why the main event in a story happened – even if the answer is that nobody knows or nobody will say.

## Numbers and related information

The reader will best remember points about numbers and background if they're served in a concise fashion. Often, the writer will be tempted to scatter the information through the text because he or she has quotes or additional points to make about each number or topic. But almost always, the significant numbers can be grouped together.

- If you're making a point about costs: "The new project will cost \$11 million. The city is willing to contribute \$4 million, and other sources may pony up \$4 million. But the county still needs to find \$3 million. The county has a total budget of \$12 million per year."
- If you're making a point about a person's career: "He was the first black elected to the Gadsden County School Board, in 1978. He went on to be a principal in several schools from 1980 to 1992. He served as superintendent from 2000 to 2008."
- A lot of times a quote or a point is not fully made unless you provide the accompanying numbers or achievements. In 2003, Jeff Sluman was asked about being the biggest money winner to never play on a Ryder Cup. He quipped, "Well, it's better than being the best player never to win a major." But the writer didn't note that Sluman won a major (1988 PGA Championship) after many years of being labeled "the best player never to win a major."

## Ages

People may say age is unimportant, but age fixes the person in time and explains many of their reactions and responses – and establishes parameters for their future. Most stories should include age, particularly those dealing with illness, mortality, achievement or being hired in a new position.

- In 2003, we wrote a story about FSU President T.K. Wetherell's diagnosis of prostate cancer. Though his age was in the bio box, it wasn't in the story.
- In 2004, we wrote about Joseph Ramsey's elevation from a physical education professor at FAMU to the school's interim athletic director, but didn't tell his age.

In both cases, age would have told us something about the situation. When a man gets prostate cancer in his mid-50s (Wetherell), that's young and is much more serious than a man who gets it in his 80s. If an interim athletic director is 36, that says something about his previous experience and chances of getting the permanent job. If he's 56, that says something else about his experience and prospects.

## Dates

The exact dates that someone did something are crucial and informative, and need to be in a story to fix the person in time and experience. Again, they're particularly crucial in an obit, a profile or a story about a promotion. If a person was a former city commissioner, give the exact dates. If someone taught for many years before going into business, give us the dates/span of years.

## Nicknames

If someone has a nickname, ask how he or she got it. In a profile, there should always be room to mention the nickname (even if it doesn't have a colorful origin). In other stories, the nickname should be mentioned only if the person is well-known for it or if there is a colorful story about its origin.

## The language

Aside from “flammable”/“inflammable,” few words in the English language are exactly interchangeable; each has a specific shade of meaning. And if you don't know that shade, you run the risk of using it incorrectly. Learn the nuances of words. It takes some work. Many of us grow up thinking we know the meaning of certain words only to find out we were wrong. Often, it's a result of the sound of the word.

- For years, I thought “desultory” meant depressing; it actually means “random.”
- Many times I've seen “diffident” used as a synonym for “indifferent”; it actually means shy or lacking in self-confidence.

Other times we have a vague understanding and go with our hunch (a headline writer used “round-robin” as a synonym for “mixing it up”; they're not the same). Try to recognize when you don't know the exact meaning and look it up before you publish. Throw away your thesaurus, or use it only with a dictionary. Too many writers, looking to vary their language, will use a thesaurus and insert words listed as synonyms – even if they've never seen the word before. Again, no two words are exactly alike, even if they may have the same general meaning. The best way to broaden your vocabulary is to read, and (using a dictionary) learn what words mean in context. If you don't already know the word, you probably shouldn't use it.

## Impact of the printed word

Reporters and editors love strong verbs and adjectives, and with good reason: The stronger and more explicit the word, the more clearly the idea is communicated. But you have to be fair, and sometimes words can be too strong:

- *NEW YORK – The Mariners have shown they can clean up on the dregs of baseball, the Kansas Citys and Minnesotas that seem sentenced to mediocrity.* [Minnesota won two world championships over the past two years; the Royals were dominant throughout the 1980s; and no major league team is really the “dregs” or “most worthless part.”]

- *Fagan clawed steadily higher, landing on the boards of the Palm Beach Opera and LIFE, an educational charity.* [The man merely joined a couple of community boards when asked; there's no particular evidence that Fagan, the guy who kidnapped his two daughters at a young age and raised them in Palm Beach, was avidly trying to "claw" his way up.]

## **Tone**

Figure out what voice a story calls for before you write it and stick with that. A story may be lighthearted or objective or alarmist – but the tone ought to fit the subject. For instance, you don't want to write lightheartedly about a little girl who played doctor with the neighborhood boy and then got beaten up when the boy got mad. On the other side, you don't want to write somberly about a man who dropped a bowling ball on his foot as he was loading his trunk in the nude. In general, be careful injecting humor into a story. Nothing is as weird as a straightforward piece in which the writer suddenly tries to inject a funny observation or line. If there's only one funny line, you probably can go without it. And any funny line followed by "Seriously, though" is probably not funny.

## **Sarcasm**

Sarcasm rarely plays as well in print as in conversation. In conversation, it can seem lighthearted and warm. In print, it generally comes across as heavy, mean-spirited and sneering.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Gerald "Perk" Ensley came to Tallahassee as a freshman at Florida State University. He planned to graduate quickly and move on. He ended up falling in love with the city and never left. He joined the *Tallahassee Democrat* as a sportswriter in 1980. During his career, he wrote for every regular and special section the *Democrat*

ever produced, including the only two "extras" published during his time there.

Ensley's first book was a compilation of a late *Democrat* sports editor's columns, "From the Sidelines: The Best of Bill McGrotha" (1993). The second was a complete history of the *Democrat* in honor of its 100th anniversary, "Tallahassee Democrat: 100 Years" (2005). His third book, "We Found Paradise' Gerald Ensley on the History and Eccentricities of His Beloved Tallahassee," focuses solely on his own work and was compiled and published posthumously.

Ensley won more than 50 state and national writing awards in more than a dozen categories, from columns to sports writing to news stories to feature stories to public service stories. It is estimated that he wrote nearly 12,000 articles in his years at the *Democrat*, and it was not unusual for his byline to appear multiple times in a single edition.

Even his retirement in 2015 didn't stop him from contributing, and the *Democrat* continued to publish his work regularly. Less than a month before his death on Feb. 16, 2018, his last column appeared on the front page, and he was working on several other articles. It was his dedication, passion and curiosity that made him such an exemplary writer.

Early in his career, Ensley was nurtured by many who believed in him. He paid that forward by mentoring countless young writers who have gone on to flourish in their own careers. This guide and the Gerald Ensley Emerging Journalist Award were created to honor that legacy. They will allow his commitment to supporting the next generation of storytellers to continue for many years to come.

To learn more about Gerald Ensley, see photos and videos, and contribute to The Gerald Ensley Emerging Journalist Award, visit [Tallahassee.com/GeraldEnsley](http://Tallahassee.com/GeraldEnsley).